

The Gen X factor: cities look for qualified candidates to replace retiring boomers

BY SARAH RAZOR



*Susan,
I need this
magazine back.
Angel*

It's time for a pre-algebra pop quiz. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 59 percent of officials and administrators in federal, state and local governments are age 45 and older. Within the public administration industry, 42 percent of employees are projected to retire by 2008. This many upcoming retirements will dramatically affect city government occupations.

Who will replace the baby boomers? If you answered X, you get partial credit. Generation X is a very important part of the solution, but there are far fewer Gen Xers than there are baby boomers.

The demographic boundaries of Generation X are not well defined, but it is generally made up of the roughly 50 million people born between 1965 and 1979. That's about 12 million less than the boomers born between 1946 and 1964.

This major demographic change is frequently headline news because the shortage in skilled workers will hit hard across all sectors. Unfortunately, the public sector will be facing an even greater shortage of administrators and managers.

Local leaders and city officials in Kentucky are already facing a surge of retirements of highly skilled personnel and a shrinking pool of qualified candidates. In Leitchfield, the police chief, public works director, utility superintendent and fire chief are all on track to retire in the next year.

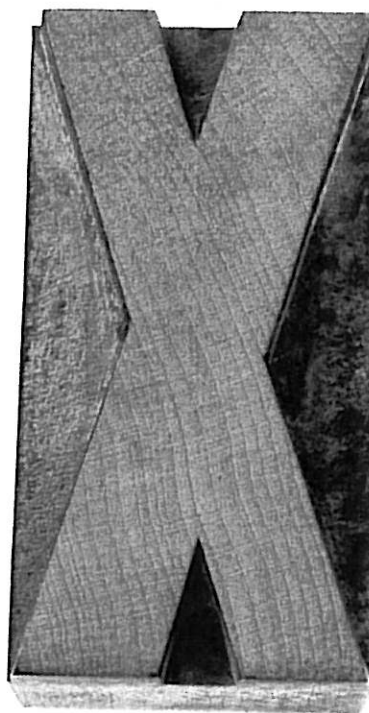
"We'll look internally first, and if someone isn't as qualified, we'll have to look outside," said Kerry White, Leitchfield city clerk and treasurer.

Because of the gap in the number of workers between the generations, competition will be fierce for trained young professionals to fill positions in government.

Partisan politics and the limits of small-town life and pay make it even harder for some cities to attract and retain qualified young and mid-career professionals.

"We have seen an increase in retirements in police and fire departments. The issue for us is getting enough recruits in training to fill positions," said William E. Moller, Covington's assistant city manager.

To ensure that a group of qualified recruits is available when police and fire positions open, Covington is moving toward continuous testing of candidates rather than holding tests once or twice a year.



In 2006, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), a local government leadership and management organization, conducted a national survey of 369 cities regarding hiring practices and the relationship between local government employees and master's degrees in public administration (MPA) and public policy (MPP).

The survey found that 75 percent of current government supervisors who had supervised someone with an MPA or an MPP rated the leadership potential of those employees as better or much better than other professional employees doing the same work. In

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addition, 81 percent of supervisors rated the general performance of employees with MPAs or MPPs as better or much better than other professional employees doing the same work.

While professionals with an MPA or MPP are qualified to fill the gaps left by retiring boomer government

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administrators and officials, local governments are struggling to connect with these graduates.

"Students are definitely interested in working in local government but get very little information on how to do so," explained Dr. Kendra Stewart,

assistant professor in the Department of Government at Eastern Kentucky University.

"City management is a great opportunity to be very involved in a community, but it's hard to come in as an outsider," noted Will Warren, a recent graduate of the MPA program at the University of Kentucky and an intern with the NewCities Institute.

"There are several fellowship programs for the federal government and internship opportunities within state government, but there is no feeder program for city government," he said.

The answer to the question of who will replace the baby boomers is not going to be as simple as a pre-algebra problem, but there are some promising young professionals who want to work in the public sector. It seems that the missing part of the equation is connecting city officials with them.

"The biggest problem is that there is no central place for students to get information on hiring," Stewart said.

"A central place for job information and tips for working in local government would probably be the best thing that could happen towards attracting the best and the brightest to cities."

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